

# ACTING “WHITE”: THE UNSPOKEN, UNDERSTOOD HIERARCHY OF BLACKNESS

by

Courtnee Nicole Bishop

December, 2019

Director of Thesis: Dr. Rick Taylor

Major Department: English

This thesis will examine how a variety of extenuating factors serve to complicate a black person’s self-identity, as well as determine acceptance or exclusion from the black community in the United States. The introductory chapter will explain my personal interest and history with this occurrence. Racial theory and the sociological framework for the thesis will be explained in the first chapter. The effect of education on the perception of blackness will be discussed in the second chapter. The third chapter will highlight the seeming incompatibility of blackness and affluence. Finally, the enactment of blackness, such as in style and speech, will be examined in the fourth chapter.



ACTING “WHITE”: THE UNSPOKEN, UNDERSTOOD HIERARCHY OF BLACKNESS

A Thesis

Presented To the Faculty of the Department of English

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in English conc. Multicultural and Transnational Literatures

by

Courtnee Nicole Bishop

December, 2019

© Courtnee Nicole Bishop, 2019

ACTING “WHITE”: THE UNSPOKEN, UNDERSTOOD HIERARCHY OF BLACKNESS

by

Courtnee Nicole Bishop

APPROVED BY:

DIRECTOR OF  
THESIS:

---

Rick Taylor, Ph.D.

COMMITTEE MEMBER:

---

Will Banks, Ph.D.

COMMITTEE MEMBER:

---

Seodial Deena, Ph.D.

CHAIR OF THE  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH:

---

Marianne Montgomery, Ph.D.

DEAN OF THE  
GRADUATE SCHOOL:

---

Paul J. Gemperline, Ph.D.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my husband for always supporting me, especially as I constantly redefine my best version of myself. I am also forever grateful to the incredible professors I had the pleasure of learning from during my time at East Carolina University. Finally, I am immensely privileged and thankful to have the continued support of my friends and family members.

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: The Theory and Hierarchy of Blackness .....	11
Chapter Two: Education As a Controlling Measure of Blackness .....	21
Chapter Three: The Apparent Incompatibility of Blackness and Affluence .....	33
Chapter Four: The Enactment of Blackness: Speech, Style, and Activism .....	45
Conclusion: Lessons for Future Generations .....	56
References .....	59

## Introduction

Here are some of the reasons why my black card should be revoked: I have never read or seen *Roots*, my family has no direct or even murky connection to slavery, and I do not like trap music. To this day, I still lack any real knowledge about the Black Panthers, Malcolm X, or any of the other controversial civil rights players who were purposefully omitted from the history textbooks at my Christian schools. I did not cross paths with canonical black writers like Frederick Douglass, Zora Neale Hurston, and Toni Morrison until I reached college. The only real black culture I picked up during my childhood was in sitcoms like *The Cosby Show*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, and *Family Matters*—all of which are often discounted as being inauthentic depictions of “real” black families anyway. But here are some of my redeeming qualities: I have rhythm and natural hair, and I prefer sweet potato pie over pumpkin. My skin is some shade between blue-black and high yellow, and my lips are as full as my hips. By all identifiable physical markers, I *am* black. The only “problem” is that I was never taught to *be* black.

To understand how I have become who I am, I have had to critically analyze the village—the environments, the education, and the people—that raised me. Let me start with the place: Florida, 1992. After my mother broke up with my father and left New York City, she moved to Pine Hills, a suburb of Orlando, Florida. Allow me to conceptualize. According to the 2000 census, Pine Hills was an ethnically diverse region comprised of a 41,764 person population that was 33.9% white, 51.4% black (including residents of Caribbean ancestry), and 14% Hispanic or Latino. In addition to being diverse, the population of Pine Hills was also relatively young: 30.7% of its residents were between the ages of 25 and 44 (“Pine Hills CDP, Orlando”). However, despite the range of ethnic backgrounds present and the vibrancy of a



young populace, Pine Hills was not the most desirable place in which to live. The 2000 census states that the per capita income was \$13,257, and 18.5% of individuals lived below the poverty line (“Pine Hills CDP, Florida”). Because of its reputation for property theft and violent crimes, the Orlando-Crime Hills metropolitan area has consistently ranked among one of the most dangerous cities in Florida. In short, it was not an idealistic place to raise a child.

When my great-grandmother died in 1997, my mother jumped at the opportunity to move into her house in Clermont, Nana’s safer town that was forty minutes west of Pine Hills. Compared to Pine Hills, Clermont’s population was much smaller (9,333 residents), older (13.6% of the population was aged 65-74), and whiter (83% white, to be exact) (“Clermont City, Florida”). The per capita income was \$21,099 and only 7.8% of individuals lived below the poverty line. As evidenced by those statistics, Clermont was largely inhabited by retirees and seasonal snowbirds. Clermont was a much better place to live and raise a child, but I was still technically “stuck” in Pine Hills, so to speak. Because I was excelling at my school, my mother did not have the heart to pluck me from my familiar, private, Christian school in Orange County to put me in a public school where we lived in Lake County.

Shuttling me back and forth got easier when I finished middle school in 2004. My mother enrolled me in a private high school in Winter Garden, which was about twenty minutes closer to home. Winter Garden’s population was very similar to Clermont’s: there were 14,351 residents, 31.3% of which was made up of 25-44 year olds; the per capita income was \$18,082, and 12% of individuals lived below the poverty line (“Winter Garden City, Florida”). Although far from diverse, Winter Garden was a relatively safe town in which I was allowed to get into typical teenager tomfoolery without my mother losing sleep wondering about who I was around or what I was really getting up to.

Though somewhat inextricably bound to the physical location in which I encountered it, the formal education I received deserves to be recognized in its own category regarding my development. From kindergarten until eighth grade, I attended a large, private school in Pine Hills called Kingsway Christian Academy. Instead of teaching facts meant for solely rote memorization, the administration encouraged curiosity, logic, and reason. The staff's ethnicity was representative of Pine Hill's diverse ethnic makeup, and as such, I found all of my teachers to be excellent conduits of information that I would build on later in life. Even more, I felt that they cared about me and my academic progress. It was an incredible and perfect initial entry to the world of academics. Even to this day, I still credit Kingsway with instilling in me a love of education. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about my high school experience at Calvary Christian School.

At the very least, Calvary's use of the Bob Jones University curriculum was an absolute disservice to its students. I was a straight A student at Kingsway for the nine years I attended, yet I struggled to adapt to the Bob Jones University curriculum and teachers that valued rote memorization over logic. I must add here that I do not have any problems whatsoever with the belief in a higher being, whomever that being may be. I do, however, have a problem with a high school curriculum that is centered on a presupposed, unwavering belief in and devotion to a god—in this case, the God of white Southern Baptists. For example, history lessons sugarcoated the forceful removal of Native Americans from their lands while explaining that was done for the glory of the Almighty. The horrors of slavery in the United States were minimized because “not all slaveowners were bad; some even taught their slaves how to read the Bible!” And every single year, lessons about the marches, sit ins, and protests of the Civil Rights Movement were

glossed over all too briefly, if we managed to get to them at all, because resistance was viewed as an immoral quality.

Calvary Christian School was nothing like Kingsway, but the most glaring difference between the two schools was the sheer size. For the entirety of my time at Kingsway, nearly all of my classes had between twenty-five to thirty students. At Calvary, I was one of thirteen juniors during the 2006-2007 school year. The graduating senior class of 2008 had exactly ten students, including myself. Another substantial difference between the two schools—and the one that relates specifically to this thesis—is the racial makeup of the school. Unsurprisingly representative of the Winter Garden population, the majority of students were white and came from households that were comfortably middle or upper class. Not a single person in authority—be it on the teaching staff or from administration—was a person of color. Five black high school students were enrolled during my four years at Calvary, two of whom were from Jamaican families. The lack of diversity in my adolescent years matters because it ultimately shaped the characteristics I possess that some people mark as “white” traits.

Lastly but most importantly in my village are the people who raised me, starting with my relatives. I am a first-generation American born into a family of Jamaican immigrants. I know I should technically refer to my relatives as Americans because their immigration status has long since changed, but ideologically, they are just as Jamaican now in 2019 as they were when they first arrived in Queens, New York in 1972. They still believe that depending on the age of the patient, any and every ailment can be cured by either warm milk and freshly grated nutmeg or Wray and Nephew’s overproof white rum from Kingston. No music—American or even new Jamaican music—will ever trump the old school “riddims” of Bob Marley and the Wailers, Beres Hammond, and Buju Banton. I am even willing to bet that my grandparents are probably

listening to one of those artists at this very moment, regardless of the fact it is the only music they have listened to since they emigrated. I have never known a pot roast, meatloaf, Papa John's pizza, homemade spaghetti, or Kentucky Fried Chicken to ever be served in my grandparents' house, although they did make an exception for Golden Corral on occasion. Food—real food—is only cooked well done, and it is one of the traditional Jamaican staples: ackee and saltfish, callaloo and dumplings (not to be confused with Southern dumplings), oxtail, curry goat, jerk chicken, and the like. To illustrate my point about the repetitive, homogenous kinds of food eaten during my childhood, my eighty-two year old grandmother ordered her very first fajita from Chili's earlier this summer. She spent thirty minutes eating each component individually before my uncle realized that she did not know to combine the ingredients in the flour shell and eat it as one item. Only after my uncle compared the dish to roti, which of course is a Jamaican dish, was she able to visualize the fajita as something familiar instead of a foreign Mexican dish.

Aside from my ingrained choice of comfort food and music, I have to admit that my grandfather's ambition is the one substantial thing I have kept with me from my Jamaican immersive upbringing. Without meaning to sugarcoat it, Grandpa's early life was far from easy. Having been largely abandoned by his parents and having attained nothing more than a fourth grade education, he was forced to work with his hands instead of his head at a very young age. In effect, this was providing hard, manual labor for a variety of households in the back country of Jamaica in exchange for the basest of places to lay his head at night. He abhorred that life, but it motivated him to do what was necessary in order to leave his homeland. In short, his journey is the American Dream realized. He immigrated to New York in 1972, found work as a truck driver, and was able to provide his wife and two children with a comfortable middle-class existence—all without ever receiving a handout from anybody. One of the first lessons he

instilled in me was the fact that I was born with three strikes against me: I am a woman, I am black, and I come from an immigrant family. In no uncertain terms, that meant I had to work for any and everything I have because nobody would ever give me anything. Even more, I was never supposed to *expect* anything because it means more to achieve it by my own hard work. I heard the “give a man a fish” adage more than I care to count during election years and especially when Democrats were in office. Needless to say, his past and personal determination cement the reasons why he is a staunch, ultra-conservative Republican.

In the entire scheme of my family tree, my grandparents are the relatives who had the first shaping influence on me, especially when I lived with them during middle school. My father has never been an active or substantial part of my life, and my mother was the cliché single mother who was always working to make ends meet. Even when I did go back to living with my mother during high school, our daily routines and obligations meant that we were more like ships passing in the night than anything else. That is not to say that she did not care, was not involved, or was not aware of what I was doing. She was. However, by the time I started driving during my junior year, I was just spending more time with my friends and classmates than I was with my family members.

Like most people, my family created my foundation, but my friends and their respective families shaped much of who I am. It goes back to an event on the Kingsway playground when I was five years old. A chubby boy I do not remember was picking on a small girl I will never forget. I said something to him, he left her alone, and I asked her if she wanted to be my friend. C has been in my life ever since. Long before I could understand the differences in opportunity, wealth, or race, I just knew that C’s two story house was in a real neighborhood in Orlando proper, and my mom’s two bedroom apartment was minutes away from the Pine Hills ghetto.

Her mother, Miss B, did not work then, and still has not in the twenty-four years that I have known her. Instead, she pursued things that mattered to her, such as advocating for social rights, throwing parties, picking up new hobbies, and taking vacations to exotic places. I never went without, but C lived in excess. She had her own bathroom, phone line, pets, and a TV/VCR combination long before anyone else I knew did. Miss B and C took me in as their own and introduced me to Girl Scouts, parties, the tradition of mailing holiday cards, red meat cooked considerably less than well done, and water activities. (Despite being from an island, most of my family members do not know how to swim. In fact, they have an intense fear of water because one of my uncles drowned when he was a child). As an activist, Miss B took the time to explain to me that “liberal” was not as scary of a word as my conservative grandfather always painted it to be. Neither was her sister’s homosexual marriage, which I was not aware of until I was well into my teenage years despite having known Aunt C and Aunt K since I was five years old.

My other best friend, L, and her family offered me a slightly different education. From them, I learned about the significance of college, blended families, hunting, military service, and NASCAR. They also introduced me to football, country and rock music, and wrestling. Her family was the first one in which I saw firsthand the dynamics of a loving, functional two parent household; that in and of itself is important because it was rare to come by, even in my own family. Although the two of them attended Kingsway at different times, L, C, and I were somehow brought together in a formidable way that lasted. The three of us come from very different walks of life, but have maintained an incredibly close friendship for over twenty years.

Lastly in terms of the people I encountered, my husband and his family have also added to the informal education I did not get from home. For starters, they are an incredibly close, once poor family from Ocoee, a small town fifteen minutes west of Pine Hills. Back in its day, Ocoee

was not known for having many black residents or for being particularly welcoming to them. On Election Day 1920, a group of Ku Klux Klan members kidnapped, beat, and lynched Julius “July” Perry, a local black businessman and black voting rights advocate while another group of KKK members burned Methodist Quarters, the sole black neighborhood in Ocoee, to the ground. Depending on the source, the death toll from that night varies from a few to up to fifty (“Ocoee on Fire: The 1920 Election Day Massacre”). According to an article in the *Orlando Sentinel*, “About 500 blacks lived in Ocoee in 1920, before the massacre. Ocoee had no black residents in 1940, 1950, 1960, or 1970, according to census figures. Census-takers found 29 in 1980” (Hudak). In 2000, Ocoee’s population was still 81.5% white and just 6.6% black (“Ocoee City, Florida”). The town has definitely seen a massive burst of diversification over the last ten years, but not much about those previous statistics had changed when I was in high school. Back then, it was very much like the old days when my husband’s parents grew up there in the 1960s.

Consequently, my inclusion in my husband’s family did not come without its fair share of bumps. That is not to say that they were ever disrespectful or hateful toward me; that is actually far from the truth. However, I can admit that the older generations maintained a careful standoffishness until they actually got to know me. His paternal grandmother—rest her soul—referred to me without malice (and never to my face) as “the nigger girl” until I legally became part of the family. Once I became a Bishop, it softened to “the colored girl.” The other side of his family was not very different. His maternal grandmother, who was born and raised in southern Alabama, did not encounter a black person until she was fifteen years old. Even at that age, she was scared and unsure about how and if she should interact with her at all. I have never held anything against them because I cannot blame them for how they were raised—only how they treated and continue to treat me. Not having had any exposure to people that act, think, and look

differently than they made it a bit difficult to transcend the stereotypical beliefs they had about black people. But I did it. After the younger generations vouched for me and the older generations got to know me, I was happily and heartily welcomed into the family. Over the last ten years, the entire family has come to love and appreciate the sprinkle of diversity I have added or exposed them to. They genuinely treat me as one of their own, and from them I have learned true Southern hospitality and comfort, the sacred art of traditional Southern dishes, and the value and art form of real estate.

As I have carefully laid out, it is evident that I have been largely socialized by different classes of white families for the last twenty-four years of my life. With that said, I still see myself as black. However, throughout my early years of college and during my time as a high school English teacher, I had to constantly explain and defend who I am to people who believed that I was an imposter. I have heard the gamut of “you act white,” “you talk white,” “you’re like an Oreo—black on the outside, white on the inside” for decades. My use of standardized English has always been classified as “too proper” to be black, i.e. “white.” In a professional setting, that meant that my students erroneously thought that I was somehow smarter than other black teachers, including one whom I took most of my undergrad classes with at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke.

In short, these experiences have led me to delve into this topic of the unspoken, yet understood hierarchy of blackness within the black community. Physically speaking, I am no different from any other black woman who was raised in a traditional black American family, but that begs two questions: what constitutes a “traditional” black family and what makes me different from that norm? My Jamaican upbringing was indeed slightly different from a “typical” black American’s upbringing, but not so much as to consider it as an altogether foreign



experience. The interactions of my education, social standing, and socialization are what have discredited my blackness. My form and enactment of blackness, as someone who is a first generation American born into a family of immigrants, is not analogous to the longstanding conception of black American culture, and thus is not acceptable as being black—at least not to the community of people who perceive themselves as being authentically black.

In the following chapters, this thesis will carefully explore the repercussions that education, affluence, and enactment have on the connotation, presentation, and recognition of blackness. As young adult literature predominantly focuses on its respective characters' tumultuous paths of transition and identity, I will utilize this specific genre to highlight the struggle that these in between characters have faced in terms of self-identity in conjunction with belonging to the community at large. My conclusion will concisely summarize the information I have presented while explaining that there is a marginalized community present within the black community. By the end of this thesis, I aim to demonstrate that the notion of race is a relative label that is not only ineffective, but also harmful to self-worth and identity.

## Chapter One: The Theory and Hierarchy of Blackness

Race is a highly complex notion that has been subject to debate for as long as physical differences have separated groups of people. Despite being one of the most superficial of ways of grouping humans into classes, categorization based on skin color and other physical features have historically been used as a means of understanding, but also as a method of subjugation and enslavement. Though race-based enslavement has been largely eradicated from the western world, the perceived distinction between races remains, even in parts of the United States. Even more, an unspoken division still exists within the black community. With a special focus dedicated to the black and African American experience, this chapter's purpose is to discuss how race has been conceptualized and enacted in the United States, and show how those primitive, false assumptions have tainted the definition of blackness<sup>1</sup>.

As much as I understand the problematic nature of racial colorblindness, I have to admit that I was raised under this belief system and to some extent, I still agree with it. The Jamaican coat of arms is proudly displayed in each and every one of my relative's homes. A male and female Taino Indian come together above a banner that displays the nation's motto: "Out of many, one people." The motto may seem like wishful thinking, but in Jamaica, it is the established practice. Accent withstanding, many people conceptualize Jamaicans as being dark skinned and having kinky or nappy hair. This is far from the truth. Like Americans, there is not just one physical manifestation of a Jamaican. They can be described as mentioned above, such as Usain Bolt. They can also be light skinned like Bob Marley, Asian as in the large amount of

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this thesis, the terms "black" and "African American" are often used interchangeably. In this chapter however, "black" refers to people who identify their heritage as being aligned with geographical regions other than Africa, such as the Caribbean. Consequently, "African American" relates to those who trace the origin of their identities to Africa.

people who emigrated to the island from China in the 1800s, or even just as white as the proverbial blonde hair, blue eyed All-American. I make no exaggeration in stating that Jamaicans do not assume that ethnic differences translate into a distinction of races. They truly believe that regardless of the texture of one's hair, the shape and color of one's eyes, or the shade of one's skin, they all belong to one people: Jamaican. The only real distinctions they typically make are among three irrefutable attributes—lazy or hardworking, dishonest or trustworthy, and Jamaican or not Jamaican.

This friction between shades of the same race was not something I personally encountered until I reached the real world, yet I suppose I knew it always existed because I witnessed a similar kind of discrimination. My grandparents' open-armed entrustment of Jamaicans over non-Jamaicans translated into their downright refusal to be considered black, as in African American. It was not founded on the concept of color, but rather ideals. Just as some women shirk at being labeled as a feminist, my grandparents viewed the African American descriptor as being synonymous with uneducated, lazy, and/or someone who succeeds by taking advantage of the system. Theirs is an undoubtedly prejudicial and flawed system all the same, and it is better explained in a detailed study entitled "Racial Identity and the Political Ideologies of Afro-Caribbean Immigrants." In short, my grandparents fit into the description of not having black racial solidarity which is defined as "a sense of racial allegiance developed in reaction to living in a White-dominated society" (Thomas). The study questions how these two distinctions of the same race have managed to remain separate in ideologies.

Racial solidarity is expected to be the principle theoretical mediator of whether the political ideologies of Black immigrants converge with those of U.S-born Blacks. However, the reluctance of many Black immigrants to embrace a U.S.

Black identity raises significant questions concerning when this convergence occurs. [A separate study] indicates that the use of a Black racial identity among second-generation Caribbean immigrants is highly circumscribed by socioeconomic status. While disadvantaged Caribbean immigrants are willing to identify themselves as Black Americans, their more privileged peers prefer to use more ethnic rather than a Black racial identity. (Thomas)

The disparity between Caribbean immigrants and black Americans is a modern, but more complicated version of the attitudes held during the slave era: a holding fast to an arbitrary distinction that has never been correct or necessary, yet still exists. In *Imagining Black America*, Michael Wayne cites sociologist Mary C. Water's study of West Indian immigrants in New York City during the 1990s:

The immigrants did not regard having a strong racial identity as meaning that they identified with black Americans. In fact, most immigrants distanced themselves from black Americans and wanted other people to know that they were not the same. They saw themselves as superior to black Americans, and they were disappointed and dismayed at the behaviors and characteristics they associated with black Americans. Although some adopted the term "American" as part of their identity, referring to themselves as Jamaican or West Indian American, they did not want to be seen as simply "black American" because for most of them assimilation to black America was downward mobility. (139)

That degree of distinction is even stronger now that my grandparents are octogenarian retirees. As I mentioned in the introduction, their stance—especially my grandfather's—is that of ultra-conservative Republicans. He is not necessarily bothered by the social injustices black

Americans have faced in this country because his “work hard and don’t expect anything from anybody” mantra is what motivated him to secure a comfortable life despite having to deal with occasional setbacks. As a racially colorblind Jamaican, he simply does not understand or align himself with the ideologies, priorities, and history of black Americans, especially the younger generations. This is not to say that he ever considered himself to be better than black Americans, but he certainly did make the distinction of being altogether different.

Jamaicans have successfully practiced the art of colorblindness, yet in this country it is perceived as a threat to the very parts of identity that make Americans unique. In an article in *Psychology Today*, a licensed clinical psychologist and University of Connecticut professor writes that “in America, most underrepresented minorities will explain that race does matter, as it affects opportunities, perceptions, income, and so much more. When race-related problems arise, colorblindness tends to individualize conflicts and shortcomings, rather than examining the larger picture with cultural differences, stereotypes, and values placed into context” (Williams). This assertion is valid because America does have a history of systematically excluding individuals for various things—housing, education, employment—based on race. In circumstances such as these, race does indeed matter because it is yet another disqualification that trickled down from a time when the black and white races were not viewed—and certainly not treated—equally.

America’s tumultuous history and treatment of the differences between blacks and whites is where the problem lies because our nation was founded with the unspoken, but understood concept of appearance based difference. Our very Declaration of Independence states “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of

Happiness,” yet those words were exclusive in their very connotation at the time the declaration was drafted. Native Americans, immigrants, the uneducated, the poor, and women are just a few of the disenfranchised demographics that have been discriminated against despite the sentiment that our declaration proclaims. Discrimination and racism toward the black community is slightly different from the plight of the other demographic representations in that slavery’s dark, turbulent history created a division both within and without the community that still exists today.

As detrimental as slavery was to the relationship between whites and blacks in the United States, it was even more harmful to the black community because it created an innate system of worth and importance that was based on arbitrary ideals. Due to miscegenation and the resulting shakeup of genetics, any person of African descent is subject to having a myriad of physical qualities. Black is not as straightforward as it seems because it can manifest as having any shade of skin color, texture of hair, and body type, yet slave traders and owners relied on these tangible, differentiating factors as the sole means of categorizing “black” slaves from “not as black” slaves. For the sake of slavery, this practice was twofold. Lighter skinned black people were seen as aesthetically and morally more desirable because it seemingly meant that a lighter skinned individual must have European roots, and was therefore worthy of better treatment because they held some sort of educational propensity over darker individuals. The second categorization is in response to the first: division of labor. An article in *American Journal of Sociology* details the logic behind this practice:

Field hands were disproportionately of pure African ancestry and were assigned to perform physically demanding, menial tasks. They remained largely unskilled throughout their servitude, had less contact with the custom and language of the larger society, and generally experienced the harshest aspects of slavery. House

servants, in contrast, were largely mulatto offspring and descendants of white males and slave women. Slave masters assigned them to the more prestigious and socially desirable positions (e.g., cook, butler, coachman, personal companion, and the like). Training for skilled occupations was often reserved for the children of these personal servants. Possession of a skill was not only esteemed and a source of pride among slaves, but it often conferred other privileges such as the opportunity to work as a free laborer, save money, and purchase one's freedom. (Keith 762)

This favoritism based separation instituted a hierarchy of blackness in which lighter skinned blacks were seen as being better than darker skinned individuals, and as such, they were given advantages and privileges that the other distinction did not, or often could not, have. Slaves were well aware of the distinction of how differently they were treated based on the color of their skin. Keith continues with how that attitude permeated the mindset of people from both sides of the spectrum. The article continues with

Along with color differences in occupational status, the similarities between whites and mulattoes in physical appearance, speech, dress, and customary behavior reinforced this attitude in the slave population as a whole. Mulattoes, therefore, enjoyed prestige among the darker slaves. Because of this structure of privilege, the slaves viewed light skin color as a desirable asset and as symbolic of more humane treatment. Black skin and black physical characteristics, on the other hand, were viewed as undesirable and as signs of inferiority. For these reasons, the negative stereotypes associated with 'blackness' and the value placed on 'lightness' of skin by whites became widely accepted by the slaves (762-3).

As incredible as it seems, this belief system is still prevalent in the black community. It has evolved over time to include different sets of criteria, but it is still a form of internalized racism none the less.

I digress here to share a personal story that I believe is relevant to this point. I spent six weeks with my husband, HH, in Stuttgart, Germany during the winter of 2015. From what I can estimate based on my limited time in the country, the vast majority of the Stuttgart population is what is best described as stereotypical German: tall, broad, and light skinned with mostly straight hair. Ethnic minorities are present, but not in overwhelmingly large numbers.

HH and I went to a club one night and we encountered a man that we still talk about from time to time. The man was very dark skinned and had a thick African accent, which in and of itself was not an entirely uncommon occurrence that I noticed when I was in Stuttgart. With that said, he and I were the only people of color who were in the club that night. He was sleeping with his head on the bar when we first noticed him, but apart from that, he did not stand out for much of the night. He woke up at one point and we inadvertently came to a standstill because our intended paths crossed each other. I gestured for him to go ahead of us, and for some reason, it rubbed him the wrong way. At our impasse, he demanded to know why I treated him the way I did. He admonished me for not accepting the fact that I—his “sister”—was a distant family member and that I was apparently refusing to “stick together.”

There are a variety of reasons why our short interaction may have gone south, but I believe it is due to the fact that he craved the connection the seemingly bonded us: appearance based kinship. Despite the fact that he and I came from two vastly different cultural backgrounds, he must have believed that he and I were more alike to each other than either of us was to any of the other people in the club. What he misunderstood as my refusal to acknowledge



our ancestral relationship is the exact point of this thesis: black is black regardless of how it is enacted...almost.

The concept that infinitely complicates this thesis is determining and then explaining what the accepted standard of blackness is. As discussed earlier, physical appearance is a fickle, unreliable indicator which hints that the satisfactory method of classifying blackness is therefore some convergence of actions and ideologies. However, one of the biggest challenges associated with defining blackness is conceptualizing it as an entity that exists entirely independently of the perception of urban. In an article in *The Guardian*, journalist Kehinde Andrews provides a brief, but adequate description. He states “‘Urban’ is rooted in US sociologist Elijah Anderson’s notion of the ‘iconic ghetto,’ where the image of the streets, the hood or the endz dominates how we understand black communities. ‘Urban’ stands in for black and comes with all the same stereotypes. This erases the diversity of the black experience” (“‘Urban Sounds’: It’s Time to Stop Using This Hackneyed Term for Black Music”). For the longest time, this has been the acknowledged, normalized concept of black and blackness. Inner city living, single mother households, poverty, and high crime rates do not define the black experience. Neither does rap music, the ability to dance, or having an unshakeable belief that Tupac is still alive.

Having similar philosophies is what best bonds any given demographic of people, and that extends far beyond the distinction of color. However, that still acts as a difficult criterion for inclusion in the black community. Since June 2015, Rachel Dolezal’s name has been associated with my working ideas for this thesis because I found her story to be fascinating. As many are aware, Dolezal was the previously celebrated head of the Spokane, Washington branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) for years before being outed by her parents for being a white woman. In her own words in a 2017 interview with

Savannah Guthrie, Dolezal stated: “I don’t identify as African American, I identify as black...I definitely feel like, in America, even though race is a social construct...there’s still a line drawn in the sand, there are still sides, politically there’s a black side and a white side, and I stand unapologetically on the black side” (Stump). Despite the years of service Dolezal dedicated to her branch of the NAACP, her entire legacy was tarnished, but not because of job related incompetency or corruption. Nor was it for the fact that she is actually white as the institution’s official statement about her makes exceedingly clear: “One’s identity is not a qualifying criteria or disqualifying standard for NAACP leadership....In every corner of this country, the NAACP remains committed to securing political, educational, and economic justice for all people, and we encourage Americans of all stripes to become members and serve as leaders in our organization” (“NAACP Statement on Rachel Dolezal”). However complicated the validity of her claims were, the reason Dolezal fell from grace was that she represented herself as someone she was not. A lie is a serious offense, especially by someone in such a highly visible and important position, but the fallout was far more damning because of the fact that she took on being a black woman. As stated by the executive director of the Washington State Commission on African American Affairs in an article in the *Los Angeles Times*, Dolezal’s case “goes to the heart of white privilege. An African American can never wake up and say, ‘I’m gonna make my hair blond, put on white makeup and go through my day as a white person.’ Not that [Dolezal] consciously thought, ‘If I don’t like it I can go back and be a white lady,’ but she appropriated” (LaGanga). The article further states that Dolezal’s choice to forgo her white identity in order to intentionally live as a black woman hints that she may struggle with her mental health.

I have never attended an NAACP rally, nor do I even know where my local chapter is located. How does that make me more superficially qualified than Dolezal to not only live life as

a black woman, but to also be automatically accepted by others as being black? Keep in mind that I was not raised with the looming cloud and history of discrimination over my head and that I spent the majority of my time with people who were also unaware of or had not lived the black experience. I am accepted on sight as being black, but as soon as I open my mouth, a dismissive assessment is made that I am not *really* black.

This enigma shows that blackness is really nothing more than a social construct by which certain factors are used as a means of controlling membership. Over the next few chapters, I will explain those specific aspects that inadvertently taint the perception of one's blackness. The next chapter, "Education As a Controlling Measure of Blackness," will lay the groundwork for the works I will continue to refer to throughout the remaining chapters. In addition, this is where I will analyze the respective educations of specific characters from literature and popular media.

## Chapter Two: Education As a Controlling Measure of Blackness

Education is one of the most significant measures against which one's blackness is measured because unlike many other factors, it frequently functions as a gateway. A "good" education often leads to better career opportunities, which in turn leads to a better financial standing that is indicative of upward mobility. This is not to say that the black community looks down on education; it is actually quite the opposite, but with conditions. Hypothetically, a black person is supposed to receive an education in a setting that mirrors and reinforces the beliefs of the community. The person is then expected to give back to that community, usually by using their new knowledge or skills for the direct betterment of that same community. Education is an advantageous opportunity, yet it creates a problematic perception of identity because the black student is forced to constantly straddle the line between empowerment provided by their education and the guilt of being considered "white" once back in their home environment.

Without question, a black person who receives an education in a setting that is predominantly Caucasian, or at the very least is comprised of few minorities, is perceived by the black community as being well on their way to becoming an ungrateful sell-out. This idea is a direct consequence of the prejudicial divide established during slavery which largely kept blacks from being educated on the basis of subjugation. This was reaffirmed in the years following Reconstruction when schools were established for all students, but under the constraint of segregation. The Virginia Museum of History and Culture states,

[Black] schools, however, were at the mercy of the white-controlled state government for funding. Many whites did not want blacks to become educated, fearing they would challenge white supremacy and not be content with jobs

working in the fields or in domestic service. Black schools therefore received far less financial support than did white schools. Black schools had fewer books, worse buildings, and less well paid teachers. Ramshackle, segregated schools marked black Virginians with a stigma of inferiority and the status of second-class citizenship that they would have to endure throughout their lives. (“Beginnings of Black Education”)

As discussed in the previous chapter, education—and by extension, trades—was reserved for lighter skinned individuals during the time of slavery. This practiced inequality is still in play today, but in a slightly different way due to legislation drafted during the Civil Rights Movement. Education is power, but the ability to access valid, adequate education is even more important. Just as a hierarchy of blackness was created amongst the enslaved due to the color of their skin, the same type of distinction is made today between black people who attend schools in well-funded districts with excellent, educated teachers and those who are not as fortunate. To this day, more black students typically receive their educations in underfunded schools with inadequate resources while those who are able to go to school in other districts are more likely to thrive in those appropriately funded and supportive settings.

Renee Watson’s *Piecing Me Together* features Jade, a young black woman who is forced to straddle the line between the poor black neighborhood in which she lives and the white environment in which she receives her education. There is no sugar coating the fact that high school junior Jade lives in poverty. Of her neighborhood, she says,

Living here means when people ask, ‘Where do you live?’ and you say, ‘The New Columbia,’ they say, ‘You mean the Villa?’ and remind you that your neighborhood used to be public housing for World War II shipyard workers, and

they remind you how by the eighties a lot of those apartments were run-down and how really, they were just the projects with a different name. (Watson 9-10)

Jade's mother wants her daughter to have a fighting chance to get out of the neighborhood, so she enrolls Jade in St. Francis, a private school in the Northeast district of Portland. During her long bus ride to St. Francis, Jade describes Northeast as an area in which "you stop seeing modest apartment complexes and start seeing houses and luxury apartment buildings, restaurants with outdoor patios, and shops of all kinds" (Watson 11). Northeast is a place of economic development that must be briefly noted in this chapter, but will be further expounded upon in chapter three, "The Apparent Incompatibility of Blackness and Affluence."

Next, the population of Jade's school is very telling of the kinds of interactions she will be forced to have. On entering the school in an early chapter, she narrates that there are "a few sections of color" in her school and by that, she means two other students, Rose and Josiah. Rose is a senior with whom she has nothing in common, despite the initial hope "[she would] become friends with because on [her] first day we talked about our braids and swapped ideas for styles" (12). Watson purposefully crafts the girls' first discussion—within the confines of St. Francis no less—around something so incredibly unique to them, their genetic makeup, and the black community at large. Their attempt to kindle a friendship based on the ethnic differences that bonded the two yet differentiated them from the rest of the school's population shows that they both were attempting to find "blackness" in each other. Unfortunately, it seems that is where the similarities ended because the two never really end up becoming friends. As for the other black student, Jade describes Josiah as a popular tech nerd, but "when he gets around his white friends—especially the boys—he puts on a voice and uses slang and acts in ways that seem opposite of who he really is" (12). The rest of the students are described as being white which

means the majority of interactions Jade has during any school day will be with people who are not black, including from the staff and faculty at her school. This matters because it taints her relationships with the people in her life who are from her neighborhood, including her friends and mother.

In Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*, Starr faces a similar kind of education driven double life, but hers is slightly different because she is more visible in her community than Jade is. Starr lives in Garden Heights, a place that is dominated by violence between two rival gangs. Riots and shootings are routine, as are killings. Even her father, Maverick, used to be a member of the Garden Disciples gang, but he successfully left the gang after completing a prison stint for a higher ranking gang member. That lifestyle is altogether foreign to the people whom Starr goes to school with at Williamson. Since the two parts of her life are complete opposites of each other, Starr feels the absolute need to live her life as two separate people. For instance, when she attends a Garden Heights party in the beginning of the novel, she states: "I'm not even sure I *belong* at this party. That's not on some bougie shit, either. There are just some places where it's not enough to be me. Either version of me" (Thomas 3). The anxiety continues once inside the party because she is worried about standing out by being standoffish.

As long as I play it cool and keep to myself, I should be fine. The ironic thing is though, at Williamson I don't have to 'play it cool'—I'm cool by default because I'm one of the only black kids there. I have to earn coolness in Garden Heights, and that's more difficult than buying retro Jordans on release day. Funny how it works with white kids though. It's dope to be black until it's hard to be black.  
(Thomas 11)

Starr is much more explicit than Jade in stating that she feels the need to make the distinction between her two personas. Garden Heights Starr is not black enough because her enrollment at Williamson has tainted her community's perception of her. This is evidenced when several partygoers accuse her of thinking she is all that and acting like she does not know anybody in Garden Heights because she goes to *that* school. None of these assumptions are true. Starr considers herself to be very much a part of the Garden Heights community, and she will later prove her devotion to it. Nonetheless, this does not negate the fact that similarly to Jade, she feels as if she cannot fully exist as herself at Williamson or in Garden Heights.

The crux of *Piecing Me Together* is realizing how Jade's status as an underprivileged black girl complicates her agency and dictates the path of her education and the opportunities presented to her. In spite of the neighborhood from which she comes, Jade is a gifted scholar. She excels in Spanish, even to the point of tutoring other students. She hopes that her natural propensity with the Spanish language will put her at the front of the line for a humanitarian study abroad program in Costa Rica. However, her guidance counselor, Mrs. Parker, has other plans. In an attempt to do what she thinks is best for Jade, Mrs. Parker decides that Jade would be best served by joining the mentorship program called Woman to Woman. As inconsequential as it may seem, the ramifications of Mrs. Parker's decision crushes and torments Jade throughout the entirety of the novel.

Although Mrs. Parker is the person who should seemingly be blamed for incorrectly placing Jade in the mentorship program over the study abroad, the situation is slightly more complex than it seems. Mrs. Parker chooses Woman to Woman because she thinks she is fulfilling a void that she believes Jade must be experiencing. She tells Jade, "Every young person could use a caring adult in her life... We want to be as proactive as possible, and you know, well,



statistics tell us that young people with your set of circumstances are, well, at risk for certain things, and we'd like to help you navigate through those circumstances" (Watson 18). Being bussed to the other side of Portland is more than a mere issue of logistics. The socioeconomic schism shifts as she busses to school, meaning that the further she travels from home, the more she stands out amongst the population at St. Francis. Mrs. Parker tries to remedy this matter in what an interviewee in Michael Wayne's *Imagining Black America* describes as a "schizophrenic existence":

Above all, parents arrange for their children to spend time in social settings that are exclusively black. They believe, observes Karyn Lacy, "that blacks who do not have ongoing transactions with other black people are not authentically black. It is only through active participation in black spaces that black children learn what being black is all about." For some, this means taking their children to weekly religious services in inner-city churches. For others, it means sending them to "black camps" in the "the 'hood," where, writes Debra Dickerson derisively, they have the opportunity to "mingle with 'thug' children." (184-5)

Woman to Woman is not necessarily a "black camp," but the idea behind Jade's enrollment follows the same logic, in part. Although she comes from a black family and lives in a black community, Mrs. Parker believes Jade is lacking in meaningful and positive interactions with black people, specifically successful black women. Having said that, Mrs. Parker may not be wrong. Woman to Woman does in fact fill a void Jade has, even if she is unaware that she has it or that it may not be a priority to her. There is no mention of a grandmother, aunt, older cousin, or any other older woman from whom Jade can learn about the subtleties of life—and by extension, the assumed subtleties of life as a black woman.

Next, when it comes to the initial issue of Jade being hypothetically misplaced in *Woman to Woman*, the blame cannot fall solely on Mrs. Parker because Jade's Spanish teacher did not set her up to get the opportunity she wanted. As her teacher, Mr. Flores is the one person who is best equipped to realize the ability with which Jade has been able to master Spanish. He indicates that he is aware of her skill by encouraging her to tutor other students because she has earned As in every semester she has had him. In terms of responsibility, he is the one who should shoulder the majority of the blame for this mishap because despite the seemingly easy choice, he is the one who chose not to nominate her. Jade simmers on this snub for the entirety of the novel before finally confronting him about his decision. His answer is crushing, "You are right that, technically, you deserved to go, but, well, I wanted to be fair to the other students... You have a lot of support and are in a lot of programs... Jade, other students need opportunities too" (199). This one decision questions the process by which students' wants are processed in accordance to their needs. Because she is an underprivileged black girl, she is thrown opportunities like SAT prep and *Woman to Woman* that seemingly close the gap of issues that are perceived to become larger problems later on in life. Regardless of how badly she wanted or even deserved to go on the study abroad trip, the higher powers were always going to choose a sure thing that they believed would help with her immediate future.

One of the few published book reviews about *Piecing Me Together* erroneously states

There are many instances of passive racism in Jade's life. The author draws a line between how people treat Jade and how people treat Samantha, Jade's Caucasian friend who is poor too. While Jade is showered with opportunities and scholarships, Sam gets nothing. People pity Jade, and to make themselves feel better, they decide to over favor the smart black girls instead of the equally smart

Caucasian girl. The two girls have nearly similar backgrounds but have been given different opportunities. (News Desk)

The article's assertion that Jade is "favor[ed] over the equally smart Caucasian girl" shows that the reviewer must have missed parts of the novel. This is not to say that Sam is not as smart as Jade is, but the fact is that Sam is one of students that Jade tutors. Sam does not grasp the Spanish language in the same way that Jade does, which is why it seems illogical that she is chosen for the study abroad over Jade. Also, Jade is never given any sort of preferential treatment over Sam. If she had been given preferential treatment, Jade would have been given more opportunities than Sam, not a different one, or most importantly, the one that she wanted. Sam's admission to the study abroad is equal to Jade's involvement in *Woman to Woman*: each receives one opportunity that is seemingly in line with what their respective teachers and Mrs. Parker believed they lacked, which argues that each girl was given the opportunity that best fit what they needed.

On the other hand, the privileged Banks family from *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* offers a glimpse of life from the opposite end of this spectrum in which the subjects are free to make their own decisions. Unlike Starr and Jade, the Banks children are not forced to straddle the line of being black in one environment and white in another because their parents' economic status affords them a life of luxury. Philip and Vivian are a highly educated power couple who are financially able to send their children and Will to the best private school in town. At the time when Will joins the Banks family, Bel-Air Academy is the prestigious all boys school in which Carlton is already enrolled. Unsurprisingly, the student population and staff are a direct representation of the almost entirely white 1990s population of Bel-Air.

Carlton does not seem to notice or care about the school's racial makeup, which may hint at the fact that he is racially colorblind and believes that all education is equal. Will, however, is not racially colorblind or naïve. In episode seventeen of season one, he pinpoints the absence of black history from his curriculum as the reason that he is failing the class. He says, "They don't teach the whole story. I mean we don't learn nothing about the black people in American history. If they taught that then maybe I'd be more interested and work harder" ("The Ethnic Tip"). He misses and craves the diversity of black history—especially from the mouth of a black person—which causes him to petition to have Vivian teach the course at the school. Will's white history teacher/basketball coach's response to the request boils down to three terrible reasons for the whitewashed curriculum: some people must be omitted for the sake of brevity, the library is available to any student who truly wants to educate themselves on black history, and the teacher only knows what is in the textbook and nothing else about American history. The conflict is made to come across as comical, but it brings attention to the fact that private schools with predominately white populations are oftentimes unable or unwilling to adequately educate students about the rich, diverse histories of non-white populations. Much like my education at Calvary Christian School, Bel-Air Academy is less than enthusiastic about incorporating a curriculum, and by extension the importance and validity of a people, who are different than the limited perspective from which it has always taught. This results in a demographic of people being wholly unaware of the very people who unconsciously contributed to their ability to be educated in the first place, which then leads to the perception that educated black people are perceived as being white.

As altruistic as it may seem, Will naturally has two ulterior motives for wanting his aunt to teach the black history class. For starters, he believes it will finally give him a leg up among

his white, academically-minded classmates. When Vivian asks if any of the students had ever heard a particular Negro spiritual, Will is the only one who raises his hand. He says, “For those of you unfamiliar with these spirituals,” (delivered as he is inches away from Carlton’s face) “allow me to explain. The slaves used to sing them to keep their spirits up and their minds on God in the face of all the oppression that they suffered” (“The Ethnic Tip”). Vivian quickly informs him that he is wrong and explains that they served as a codified language about how to escape to freedom on the Underground Railroad. His second ulterior motive is that he has the nepotistic belief that his aunt will go easy on him because he is the one who petitioned for the class in the first place. That is the very reason she comes down even harder on Will and Carlton. She tells them, “I’m sorry you felt I was being hard on you, but I thought that the two black students would actually want to get the most out of the course.” She continues to challenge Will’s initial want of the class, to which he tells her that he read Malcolm X’s autobiography three times. She tells him, “And that makes you a serious student of black history? Will, baby, you can read that book, you can wear the t-shirts, you can put up the posters, and you can shout the slogans. But unless you know *all* the history behind it, you’re trivializing the entire struggle” (“The Ethnic Tip”). Will genuinely wanted to learn black history, but he was not prepared for the amount of work that his aunt would give to him in an effort to fulfill his desire. He wanted a brief, interesting synopsis of the highlights, not to be buried in the centuries’ worth of history of his people. Funny enough, the other students—all white—genuinely appreciated Vivian’s class and petitioned for her to become a permanent history teacher at Bel-Air Academy. Will and Carlton would be the last two signatures required to move the petition forward, but they refuse to sign it.

The idea about a different type of education rears its head again much later in the series. Much to Carlton's chagrin, Bel-Air Academy becomes co-ed during his junior year, which to him is automatically equated with his "annoying" baby sister Ashley clinging to him and bringing down his credibility. Ashley attends Bel-Air Academy without much commotion until she takes it upon herself to withdraw in the fifth season because like Will in season one, she finds the education to be lacking in diversity and "realness." Philip would have handled the situation better if she chose to enroll herself in another private school, but she instead chooses a public school. The mere thought of a public education scares Philip because all he can visualize are all of the bad influences she will be exposed to in that hypothetically "bad" environment. However, he relents after going in to look at the school for himself. It may not be what he envisioned for her, but it is a safe place that provides her with a well-rounded education, which is all he, like any other parent, ever really wants.

Education is incredibly important to the focus of this thesis because it shows that it is not a universal experience. So much more than curriculum is taught in any school setting, most importantly of which is socialization, which will be discussed in depth in chapter four. For black students, the added factors of an isolated location and the demographic composition of a school does in fact impact how that student develops. In certain conditions, a "good" education i.e. the attainment of knowledge in a safe environment with capable teachers and adequate resources, is a controlling measure by which blackness is connotatively diluted, both in the student as well as in the student's community. As education directly relates to upward mobility, the next chapter will focus on affluence in the black community. By taking a special interest in the Banks family from *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, I will contrast how differently blackness is enacted between Will and the rest of the family. Much like this chapter explains how education seemingly guides

the perception of blackness, the next chapter will explain how affluence also serves as a means by which blackness is questioned.

### Chapter Three: The Apparent Incompatibility of Blackness and Affluence

One of the unspoken yet understood credos of blackness is the lived experience of poverty. For some reason, financial struggle somehow defines one's authenticity and rightful place in the black community. Conversely, not having to scrounge, scrape, or play the system seemingly denotes an individual who cannot or will not ever understand what it really means to be black. The literature in this chapter will explore how the attainment of a comfortable financial standing has defined, and by extension banned, certain individuals from being considered as being black by their peers.

In *Piecing Me Together*, the image of Jade's home life is bleak at best. Her mother was a teen mom who entered the workforce at an early age in order to take care of her family. The unskilled jobs she has been able to find have been keeping them afloat, but just barely. In fact, she was fired from her last job at a hospital because she was caught stealing supplies and snacks that she could not afford to buy. Even on the momentous first day of her junior year, Jade wakes up to find a fridge that has nothing "but baking soda in the way back and half empty bottles of ketchup, barbeque sauce, and mustard on the door" (Watson 9). Jade's mother manages to stock the fridge shortly after that passage, but this trend of not having food to eat continues throughout much of the novel, as demonstrated by Jade's stealing of food whenever she is in the presence of it, such as when she attends the Woman to Woman meetings or having dinner at her mentor's house.

Another indication of the family's impoverished status is Jade's mother's inability to provide another basic necessity for her daughter: clothing. Jade's private school does not require the students to wear uniforms, but that does not alleviate the pressure Jade feels to dress nice.



She understands the unavoidable truth that people will make assumptions about her based on the way she looks. She says, “even though everyone says it doesn’t matter how you look on the outside, it does. Especially at St. Francis. I bought clothes with the money I made from working as a tutor at the rec center over the summer. I offered Mom some of the money I earned, to help with the bills or at least the groceries, but she wasn’t having any of that. She told me to spend it on my school clothes and supplies” (Watson 3). Having a job is fine and even quite admirable for a high school junior, but as a minor, Jade should not have to worry about securing her own basic necessities. That is her mother’s job. However, the sad truth is that this is the type of life she has always known.

Furthermore, her mother’s apartment is minimalistic at best. The two bedroom apartment is not enough to house the three people who live there. As such, her uncle E.J. has commandeered the small living room as his bedroom. The kitchen table “is really a folding card table someone gave [them] a year ago. It’s not that sturdy or long, but it is enough” (Watson 25). Jade’s home is a source of shame to her, as evidenced when her mentor Maxine arrives at her home unexpectedly. Jade initially hesitates to let her in, especially since her uncle had already converted the living room couch to his bed for the night. Once Jade convinces him to set it back up, she makes a frantic dash around the apartment in an effort to tidy it up a bit. Lastly, she turns the overhead lights out. She says, “I flick the lamp on instead, hoping the darkness will hide how sad the house is” (Watson 40). Although she has no control over the state of her mother’s apartment, Jade regards it as being suggestive of who she is as a person. She chooses to hide it because she is afraid that it will make a bad first impression on Maxine.

While Starr’s home life in *The Hate U Give* is not as impoverished as Jade’s, she is not blessed with the same position of financial comfort that her classmates have. The disparity is

quite obvious when Starr's school reconvenes on the Monday after Spring Break. Her friend Maya is less than enthusiastic about recapping her time with her great-grandparents in Taipei, Britt complains about returning to Harry Potter World for the third consecutive year, and Hailey whines about being dragged to her family's house in the Bahamas in order to have bonding time. Although it is no fault of their own, Starr's friends have never lived a life that was even remotely threatened by poverty. Her friends are unable to process how fortunate they are, and as such, their respective attitudes are quite lackadaisical. This shocks Jade and reminds her that although they are the same age and attend the same school, they exist in two different worlds. She says,

And bam. That normal feeling? Gone. I suddenly remember how different I am from most of the kids [at Williamson]. Nobody would have to drag me or my brothers to the Bahamas—we'd swim there if we could. For us, a family vacation is staying at a local hotel with a swimming pool for the weekend....Who the fuck complains about going to Harry Potter World? Or Butter Beer? Or wands? I hope none of them ask about my spring break. They went to Taipei, the Bahamas, Harry Potter World. I stayed in the hood and saw a cop kill my friend. (Thomas 77)

Starr's classmates may take their respective, privileged worlds for granted, but Starr fully understands how lucky they are. The shift of their respective family's ability to provide for them creates an uneven standing that leaves Starr feeling inadequate around the people she spends the most time with.

Judging by their backgrounds alone, Starr and Jade are the kinds of young women who would in fact be considered black by the people in their respective home communities. They see and understand that expensive trips and fancy clothes are not normal for everybody, especially

for the people in their neighborhoods. Contrarily, Maxine from *Piecing Me Together* and the Banks family from *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* are the epitome of black people whose blackness is discredited because of their economic standing. Much like Starr's classmates at Williamson, each of the aforementioned black people live a life of privilege that is foreign to authentic black people, especially those who have had to scrape by.

Maxine serves as an important mentor for Jade and for a complex reason. In addition to being black, she is a successful woman who has had a comfortable, middle class life. This is significant because it is something Jade has never seen before, but also quite possibly something Jade is most likely on the way to becoming and attaining herself. Jade's mother is initially excited about Jade's being mentored by a successful black woman because the mentorship comes with a college scholarship, and Jade will have the ability to be mentored by a woman she can look up to. That changes, however, once she meets Maxine because Jade's mother did not expect Maxine to be "white" black. For instance, when Jade subtly hints to her mother that Maxine and the other mentors from *Woman to Woman* have told her that grilled fish is healthier than fried (as her mother happens to be preparing it that way at that very moment), Jade's mother goes off. She tells Jade,

"You hanging around all those uppity black women who done forgot where they come from. Maxine know she knows about fried fish. I don't know one black person who hasn't been to a fish fry at least once in their life. Where she from?" Mom won't stop talking. She goes on and on about Maxine and Sabrina and how they are a different type of black, how she knows she's going to get tired of dealing with them for the next two years. (142)

Jade's mother's strong, adverse reaction to Maxine has nothing to do with the fact that she thinks Maxine claims not to know about fried fish. It is most likely in response to her feeling insecure and jealous because Maxine lives a life that Jade's mother has never had the opportunity to have. As mentioned before, Jade's mother continuously struggles to provide for her family, and by the novel's end, it does not seem that her prospects will be changing in that respect. Seeing Maxine zip around in a fancy car and knowing that she takes Jade to events like art gallery openings, symphonies, and plays must cause her to feel inadequate by comparison, which may be why she reacts so strongly to Maxine for the first half of the book. She enforces a bogus rule that prevents Maxine from taking Jade unless she has prior consent, despite her nonchalance about where Jade was, who she was with, or what she was getting up to before she joined *Woman to Woman*. This is the only way by which Jade's mother can exercise some power over Maxine in what she incorrectly believes is a duel for Jade's love or admiration.

Similarly to the distinction Jade's mother notices between Maxine and herself, Jade also realizes the stark differences between her family and Maxine's when she accompanies Maxine to her family's home for dinner. Maxine's family's house is on the rich side of Portland, perched high above the areas of town that Jade is familiar with. As she pulls into the neighborhood, Jade remarks that the houses—"Wait, not houses. Mansions" are like nothing she has seen in person before (Watson 158). She is simply enamored with every facet of the house: the three car garage, the wraparound balcony, the yard that looks too fake to be real, as well as the grandeur of the food. Even the size surprises her, as there is a sofa in the kitchen because they have the space and ability to put one there. Later, the dinner conversation naturally turns to the family's upcoming discussion about where to go for vacation. Jade's internal reaction is nearly exactly the same as Starr's: "I wonder what it would be like to go on a family vacation. Mom and I have never

traveled anywhere together. One day I'm going to take her somewhere. Somewhere far from Oregon. Someplace you have to get on a plane in order to get to" (Watson 161). Jade's thought process shows an interesting difference in attitudes between her and her mother when it comes to assessing blackness. Her mother's initial response is bitterness and jealousy, but Jade is inspired by the difference. Instead of being prejudicial, she strives to earn that same kind of lifestyle for herself one day, despite the fact that her mother perceives Maxine and her lifestyle to be less authentically black than her own.

As mentioned before, the Banks family exists at the opposite, non-black end of the spectrum because of their wealth. Philip's journey is the most telling because the suave, intelligent lawyer turned judge came from a background that shares absolutely no similarities with how he lives his life in Bel-Air. Because he has a superficial relationship with Uncle Phil at the beginning of the series, Will is largely unaware about anything pertaining to his uncle, including where he was born and raised. He believes that his uncle is from Baltimore, but it is a half-truth. Philip's parents visit in episode four of the first season and his mother proudly shares Philip's background with Will. He is shocked to learn that Philip was born and raised in Yamacraw, a small, rural town in North Carolina. In fact, his name is not even Philip, as it is revealed by his mother referring to him only as Zeke. Thanks to his mother's recounting of his childhood, it is revealed that Yamacraw Zeke was known to slop around in the local watering hole with his pig, Melvin. These stories happened during his childhood, but they are not the image that is synonymous with Bel-Air Philip Banks. Instead of being known as Zeke from Yamacraw, Philip only wants to be regarded as the man from Baltimore who attended Princeton on a scholarship, completed law school at Harvard, and is a partner at the prestigious law firm of Furth, Wynn, and Meyer. The truth spins out of Philip's control when Will tells a reporter about

his uncle Zeke's past. Philip has a small meltdown when he realizes that his entire past has been published for everyone, including his friends and colleagues, to read:

Philip: You've destroyed my image.

Will: Man, I ain't destroyed nothing.

Philip: Of course you did. Look at that story. I've gotta walk into that banquet room tonight filled with people who think I'm nothing but a hog-handling hick from Yamacraw.

Philip's mom: But that is where you come from, Zeke....What have you got to be ashamed of? We always put food on the table and clothes on your back.

Philip: Mama, I'm not ashamed. There are just certain aspects of my life I don't wish emphasized.

Philip's mom: Where I come from, they call that being ashamed, Mr. Big Shot.

As prescribed by standard sitcom resolutions, Philip is able to not only accept, but also be grateful for his childhood by the end of the episode. In his closing speech, he admits to his colleagues, "I grew up on the streets of Baltimore...but I was born on a farm in Yamacraw, North Carolina. I was one of the lucky ones. I had two wonderful parents who worked hard every day of their lives. They couldn't give me a lot of material things, but they gave me morals, courage, and most important of all, love" ("Not with My Pig, You Don't"). Philip attempted to hide the truth of his past from those who know him in Bel-Air because he is embarrassed of where he came from, but he eventually comes to see that the simplicity of his past does not have to irreconcilably clash with the life he spent decades building for himself.

As a collective whole, the Banks children start life in a position of wealth that neither their parents nor Will was able to have. In a sense, their norm—living in a mansion in Bel-Air with a butler—jades them to the reality that most black families do not resemble them in this respect. Of course, it is no fault of their own. Philip and Vivian understand the possibilities that a good education and hard work can afford, so they naturally wanted their children to have a more privileged path in life.

Will is the most interesting character to observe in this respect because the show is mostly built around his “discomfort” in this environment. In that respect, Will is very much like Starr and Jade, but with a slight difference. He was raised with the value of being “authentically” black in his home and school, so he sometimes struggles to reconcile that concept with the lifestyle he is brought into in Bel-Air. That does not mean he refuses Philip’s help or will not ask Geoffrey to make him a gorgonzola and pear sandwich on a croissant, but he often balances those instances with an exaggerated performance of his blackness.

Unsurprisingly, Carlton’s struggle to earn acceptance among members of the black community is the most heartbreaking. As mentioned many times before, he comes from a wealthy family that has prioritized his education, quite possibly at the sake of diversity and his future acceptance among other black people. Aside from Will, his father, Geoffrey, and occasionally Jazz, Carlton does not interact with other black men. This is crucial because its impact is made in two episodes where Carlton’s blackness is challenged: first in an episode in the first season called “72 Hours” and then in another entitled “Blood Is Thicker Than Mud.” The premise of “72 Hours” is straightforward: Will does not believe that Carlton can handle “real” black life and challenges him to spend seventy-two hours in Jazz’s rundown apartment building in South Central Los Angeles. To Will’s surprise, Carlton is able to seamlessly acculturate to the

men he encounters. They even take a liking to him and are receptive to his teaching them how to read and be financially literate. The bet is called off when Philip and Vivian find out where he is and demand that he returns home, but Carlton still wins because he did not give up like Will assumed he would.

The second instance occurs in the fourth season. When the men enter college, Will pressures Carlton into pledging into a black fraternity despite his initial interest in joining a fraternity of rich, white men who share a love of acapella. Will pulls Carlton away from their table for what he calls a “Negro moment” and he blatantly asks him, “Wouldn’t you rather join a fraternity where the guys look more like you look?” Colorblind Carlton insists that he was doing just that, but on the basis of the men wearing the same Lacoste shirts (“Blood Is Thicker Than Mud”). All the same, Will is able to convince him to pledge the black fraternity, Phi Beta Gamma.

As luck would have it, the pledge leader of Phi Beta Gamma happens to be a man who openly discriminates against Carlton because he does not see him as being a “real” black man. Top Dog, one of Will’s previous acquaintances, encourages Will to pledge Phi Beta Gamma because “us brothers need to stick together.” Interestingly enough, his invitation to Carlton comes because they “could use a little humor down at the frat house.” This exchange is an early foreshadowing of the physical and mental discrimination that Top Dog is planning to exert over Carlton. Over the course of Hell Week, Carlton is made to do tasks that are incredibly harder or more demeaning than what the other pledges are required to do. While Will is tasked with painting a door with a paint roller, Carlton is made to use an artist’s small brush. Will grooms a toy poodle; Carlton has to wash an adult St. Bernard that very likely outweighs him. Carlton squeezes lemons by hand and chips away at an ice block while Will’s duty is to simply deliver



the lemonade and ice to the fraternity brothers. The most absurd act is the swallowing of live fish: Will is given a goldfish, but Carlton is handed a trout. Lastly, when the pledges are told to re-tar a parking lot, Carlton is the only pledge who was not allowed to wear shoes.

Despite the hazing, Carlton maintains his usual upbeat and optimistic attitude. He believes that the events of Hell Week will all be worth it when he is inducted into the fraternity. However, Top Dog never had any intention of accepting Carlton. The Hell Week tasks were designed to be punishments for the inadequacies he deemed Carlton to have, e.g. being an inauthentic black man because of the fact that he has lived a privileged life. He dismisses him by saying that Carlton “is not exactly [the fraternity’s] type”; naturally, the following shot is of Carlton doing his trademark dance to the hip hop song that is playing in the background. The excerpted conversation follows Will being informed that he made the cut, but Carlton did not.

Top Dog: Carlton is not like you and me, you know what I’m saying?

Will: No, I don’t know what you’re saying.

Top Dog: Will, Carlton doesn’t exactly exemplify what I think a Phi Beta Gamma is.

Will: Oh, and what is that?

Top Dog: Well, it’s not Ralph Lauren shirts and wing-tipped shoes and corporate America. We don’t need a brother like him in this fraternity.

Having finally understood what Top Dog is saying, Will refuses his own place in the fraternity. He tries to save Carlton from embarrassment by telling him that he (Will) did not get in, to which Carlton immediately stands up to Top Dog in his honor.

When Top Dog tells Carlton that he considers him to be a “prep school, bail out bred sell out” that he will not accept in his fraternity, Carlton stands up for himself.

You think I’m a sellout, why? Because I live in a big house and I dress a certain way? Or maybe it’s because I like Barry Manilow. Being black isn’t what I’m trying to be; it’s what I am. I’m running the same race and jumping the same hurdles you are, so why are *you* tripping me up? You said we need to stick together, but you don’t even know what that means. If you ask me, you’re the real sellout.

This is a very poignant moment in the series because despite the three previous seasons of “playful” ribbing he has gotten from Will, it is the first time that Carlton defends his version of blackness. Back at the house, Philip continues Carlton’s train of thought by delivering the following closing lines: “I have worked very hard to give my family a good life, and suddenly somebody tells me there’s a penalty for success? When are we going to stop doing this to each other?” (“Blood Is Thicker Than Mud”). Philip’s sobering questions are the very ones that show that blackness is a hierarchy that is absolutely assessed by one’s background.

As stated above and in previous chapters, acceptance in the black community is largely conditional. In terms of financial standing, affluence is a quality that is looked down upon because it seemingly negates the typical experience or right of passage associated with financial struggle. As such, having material wealth is connotatively perceived as being incongruous to authenticity. It is a baseless, harmful assumption that is far from the truth. Like education, wealth is nothing more than a control by which inclusion to the black community can be assessed and subsequently barred. Again, this is not to say that having a comfortable life is viewed as a bad thing, but it is something that absolutely and inherently shades acceptance. In the following

chapter, the enactment of blackness will be assessed. Once explicated, it will show that like education and social standing, the performance of typical blackness functions as yet another means of separating people within the black community.

## Chapter Four: The Enactment of Blackness: Speech, Style, and Activism

It is fascinating that blackness does not have stringently defined markers, yet the terminology and its respective connotation is rarely lost on any audience. As mentioned in the chapter devoted to theory, this likely happens because blackness is often associated and used interchangeably with the concept of urban. By those standards, black is supposed to look and be enacted in an expected, stereotypical way. Not adhering to those standards must thereby mean that a black individual acts white, especially if the traits they possess are also seen in and among the white community. This chapter will delve a bit further into that distinction in order to explain the tangible acts that distinguish between “black” black and “white” black, but also to suggest that blackness does not have just one presentation.

A black person’s diction is arguably the quickest, most telling indicator of blackness because it often hints at both the person’s educational attainment and their economic background. The use of certain slang terminology, the continually missing R in particular contexts, and the habitual “be” seem to be nothing more than egregious acts of rebellion against standardized English, but it is the way of speaking that is common among those who consider themselves to be authentically and unapologetically black. Like a whole host of other things to be discussed later in this chapter, black English (variously called Ebonics, African American Vernacular English, or Black Vernacular English) is one way in which the community easily differentiates itself from the various communities.

Black English may seem like a fake, codified jargon, but the truth is that it is no less of a functional language than standardized English is. In fact, some consider it to be an art form. The linguist, writer, and Columbia professor John McWhorter explains the subtle nuances of black

English in his novel *Talking Back, Talking Black: Truths about America's Lingua Franca*. A staff writer for *The New Yorker* extracted McWhorter's example of the use of "up" in conjunction with a location.

The sentence "We was sittin' up at Tony's," according to McWhorter, "means that Tony is a friend of yours." This is an artful and convincing reading, and McWhorter carries it out in an impishly forensic manner, proving his thesis that, in some respects, Black English has "more going on" than Standard English. The latter lacks such a succinct "intimacy marker" as Black English's "up," and someone who studied Black English as a foreign language would have a hard time figuring out when, and how, to deploy it. ("The Case for Black English").

McWhorter is right in his assertion that black English can be and sometimes is more descriptive than standardized English, but its use in exclusive settings nonetheless bans it from being restrictive to inclusion in the black community. Speaking in this dialect automatically signifies authenticity whereas a black person's use of standard English seemingly points out an imposter. As code switching occurs in and depends on different scenarios, this is a curious assumption. I saw and heard this phenomenon on a daily basis during my childhood. The way my older relatives spoke—and still speak—was something much more substantial than the Jamaican accent with which they delivered their words. The words they used, the inflections they chose, and the simple delivery of their message was drastically different depending on the given place and audience. When among fellow Jamaicans, they spoke naturally—borrowed words from other languages in a rhythm that was steady yet relaxed. In public and professional settings, they sounded proper bordering robotic with only the faintest trace of their native accent that was perceptible only to people who knew what to listen for. Much like Black English, Jamaican

patois functions as a means by which membership was easily ascertained. That said, refraining from using black English in public, especially professional, spaces does not automatically mean that a black person is not black.

The enactment of that difference is quite obvious in *The Hate U Give*. In chapter one, Starr is at a Garden Heights party with her half brother's half sister, Kenya, and listening to her complain about a girl in her class. Kenya tells Starr, "And she behind me, talking out the side of her neck. She didn't use my name, but I know she was talking 'bout me...Ol' trick, gon' say, 'I wasn't even talking about you,' knowing she was!" (Thomas 6-7). Starr responds with standard English, which makes her an easy target for the other partygoers. They immediately write her off as being different from the rest of them because she speaks differently than they do. They consider this to be a "side effect" of going to her mostly white private school.

Diction aside, the concept the Garden Heights partygoers are getting at is what is commonly referred to as Starr's sounding white or using her white voice. This idea is the entire basis of the 2018 Boots Riley movie, *Sorry to Bother You*. Black telemarketer Cassius is unable to sell products by speaking colloquially. An older, black coworker tells him,

Well, you don't talk white enough. And I'm not talking about Will Smith white. That ain't white. That's just proper. I'm talking about the real deal....I'm not talking about sounding all nasal. It's like sounding like you don't have a care. Got your bills paid. You're happy about your future. You about ready to jump in your Ferrari out there after you get off this call. Breezy like... "I don't really need this money." You've never been fired, only laid off. It's not really a white voice. It's what they wish they sounded like. So, it's like what they think they're supposed to sound like. (*Sorry to Bother You*)

What Cassius's coworker—played by Danny Glover—is getting at is a sense of carefree entitlement that black people associate with white “voices” or speech patterns. He means to say that black people face an entirely different struggle that is evident in their voice, and as such, it paints them as desperately undereducated and underprivileged. Adopting a white voice symbolizes a strength and power that he foolishly asserts black people do not or cannot naturally have. Cassius tries his white voice out and discovers that his coworker was right. Despite delivering the exact same script with the same exact charm, it is only after Cassius uses this white voice—dubbed by David Cross—that he is able to find success at the telemarketing company. Among many of the points the movie makes, it is clear in conveying that a black voice—and by extension, blackness—is incompatible with success in a racist context. For Cassius to be successful, he must switch off his natural way of talking and adopt a manner of speech deemed more “dignified” by his audience.

A similar performance occurs in *Fresh Prince* as well. After watching all 148 episodes of *Fresh Prince* in a binging fashion, an interesting observation became very apparent. Will Smith's portrayal of his character was relatively stagnant for the first five seasons. In that, I mean that his style was simple, if not predictable. He had a distinctly goofy, relaxed way of speaking and acting, both of which never relied on physical theatrics aside from dancing. That changed in the sixth and final season.

The difference can only be described as what I call a “blacking up” of his character. For instance, his speech is noticeably louder and more bombastic than it had been in previous seasons. Also, it includes a lot more uses of “you know what I mean,” but the delivery is slurred and done open-mouthed, so it sounds more like “yaknawwhaI mean.” His use of physical comedy also changes. Instead of the relaxed manner he had for the previous five seasons, season six

features a version of Will Smith that karate chops, high kicks, and disrespectfully palms his costars' foreheads mid conversation. In short, his acting has become incredibly reminiscent of another well-known black actor with whom Will Smith became intimately acquainted with during this time period: Martin Lawrence.

There is no information available about when Will Smith and Martin Lawrence first crossed paths, but I can speculate. *Fresh Prince* was on the air for nearly the exact same time period and longevity that *Martin* was. It is not too far-fetched to assume that they may have met at an award show or run in the same circles, but it is undeniable that they worked closely with each other while filming the 1995 movie *Bad Boys*. Lawrence's influence on Smith is evident. So much so that it begs this question: why did Will Smith feel the need to change his character in such a dramatic way during the last season? One explanation is that he possibly cracked under the constant pressure of being criticized for not being an authentic black man, or for being on a show that did not portray life for the typical black family.

In addition to diction, a black person's sense of style is another unavoidable indication of inclusion or exclusion from the black community. Again, I refer to *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* for comprehensive examples of this point because style is one of the blatant contrasts between Will and the Bankses, especially Carlton. Throughout the entire series, Carlton dresses in what can be described as prep or country club attire. If he is not wearing a pastel colored polo, plaid, an argyle vest, or blazer, he is most likely wearing a pressed collared shirt paired with a bowtie. His pant choice alternates from colorful Bermuda shorts to Dockers and back again, but both usually match the sweater he often wears draped over his shoulders. Aside from during his basketball games in the earliest seasons, he is never seen in any kind of relaxed clothing, including sportswear. All of his clothes fit his body appropriately, giving the appearance as



though they may have been tailored. He is professional at his best and business casual at his worst, but absolutely never disheveled. His hair is cut into a neat fade, and the only facial hair he sported throughout the series was a manicured mustache. In the instances that his shoes are shown, they are often penny loafers or boat shoes.

Carlton's sister Hilary's clothes are professional like his own, but more indicative of her love of shopping. Nearly every time she is on screen, she is clothed in what is assumed to be high end designer dresses or suits. She is always immaculately put together—not a single hair is ever out of place, her makeup is always perfect, and her hats always match her designer pumps. Vivian and Philip follow suit, pun intended. Vivian never dresses as expensively as Hilary, but her outfits exude high fashion nonetheless. Due to his career as a lawyer turned judge, Philip is most often seen in expensive suits. On his off days, however, he reverts to a more slightly relaxed appearance: plaid shirts, windbreakers or vests, and Dockers similar to Carlton's.

Much like her clothing choice, Ashley Banks's character is quite curious. At the beginning of the series, Ashley is a preteen who predictably has no real autonomy over any facet of her life. She wears the clothes her parents lay out for her, and even enrolls in the extracurricular activities of their choosing. Her discontent is never explicitly expressed to her parents, but it is made obvious in her interactions with her cousin Will. She immediately latches on to the rebellions he gets into over the years, such as rapping a prayer over her father's business dinner meeting and sneaking out of the house after she hits puberty.

With that said, her clothing represents an attitude that is unlike the rest of the Bankses. In order to make herself more attractive to the boys at Bel-Air Academy, she refashions her uniform to be more seductive. During her stint as a fledgling pop star, she traipses around the house in a bikini. On her off days, she is often seen wearing blue jeans and belly shirts or loose fitting

sweaters. There is one episode in which Ashley lets Hilary give her a makeover, but dressing like Hilary only lasted for that one episode. Ashley's perception of herself, actions, and clothing choice indicate that she wishes to distance herself from her nuclear family and cling to a more street friendly persona that is similar to Will's. To be more specific, she desires to fashion herself into the type of woman that Will finds attractive.

As mentioned before, Will's attire is altogether different from the Bankses. Through the first five seasons of the show, he routinely wears something that pays homage to black culture, such as Malcolm X hats or shirts, backward baseball hats, and entire ensembles of red, black, and green, the colors of the Pan-African flag. It is also worth mentioning that instead of wearing the navy blazer of Bel-Air Academy, Will Smith's eponymously named character is easily remembered for flipping his coat inside out for a more "fly" look. Outside of the school setting, he is only seen in street clothes. The most blatant of his choices are a couple shirts that feature the I. B. Blackman logo in large, bold letters across the middle of his chest. The sizing of his clothes alternates between relaxed and baggy, though he does wear tailored suits if the episode calls for it, such as when he worked as a luxury car salesman or when he had to appear in court because Philip sued him. Through the first couple seasons, his hair was cut into a high top fade. In season three, he briefly experimented with twist like dreadlocks after spending a summer in Philadelphia, but a few episodes later, it returned to being cut similarly to Carlton's. In the earlier seasons, he only wore high top sneakers, but that changed to Timberland boots in the last two seasons.

Each man's decorating style naturally reflects their personal style. It is evident in the early seasons, but the clash is unavoidable when the pair moves into the pool house. Carlton prefers to hang art similar to the expensive paintings found in the Bankses' main living room; he

is also known to listen to Tom Jones, for which his infamous dance is done to. In opposing fashion, Will's areas feature Malcolm X paintings and a variety of baseball caps. Again, he is also known for listening to rap music and his hip hop dance moves.

The representation of style is no less recognizable in the literature analyzed. In *The Hate U Give*, Starr balances the sameness of her Williamson uniform with a variety of expensive or retro Jordans. She even justifies it in accordance with the same reasoning that Will Smith used when he turned his blazer inside out in *Fresh Prince*. In comparison to the Bankses—Carlton especially—she does not choose to relax in business casual clothing. When she is not at school, she often wears her brother Seven's baggy sweatshirt and a pair of jeans.

Finally and most importantly, an inherent sense of activism is debatably the most important, unspoken requirement for inclusion in the black community. *Fresh Prince* provides an interesting study into this notion because it addresses it from a variety of angles during the series run. In season one, Philip shares the news that he has won the “highest recognition a self-made black professional can receive”: the Urban Spirit Award (“Not with My Pig, You Don't”). He explains that he received the honor by doing community service that helps their “brothers and sisters on the streets,” to which Will immediately jokes that the only time he has ever seen him on the streets is when he is getting his car from the valet. Philip proudly informs Will of his involvement in the '63 March on Washington, the '65 demonstrations in Selma, and the '65 Watts riots, as if his presence does in fact validate the fact that he is black.

The issue is brought up again in “Those Were the Days” in season two. Marge, an old family friend, seeks refuge with the Banks family because the FBI is looking for her following her involvement helping “a bunch of migrant workers bust out of an internment camp, [breaking] into some federal buildings, [shredding] a few files, and [making] life pretty damn difficult for

the South African Embassy back east” (“Those Were the Days”). From the moment she enters the Banks’ mansion, she eagerly recalls the days that she, Philip, and Vivian used to protest for black rights. Naturally, Will feeds into what Marge is advocating for and enacts his own rebellion at school. His three day suspension creates tension between Marge and the Banks parents because the passing of time has led them to approach activism in two different ways.

Marge: If you mean am I proud to have told him to do anything you have to for what you believe in, then yes, I am.

Vivian: Marge, when you talked to Will about when we chained ourselves together at sit-ins, you’re only giving him the romantic part of the struggle. Girlfriend, you are leaving out everything that went before it. The leaflets, the petitions, the years of trying to work through the system...

Marge: If the system doesn’t work, you have to blow the door down. Looks like you forgot that.

Philip: You talk as if I wasn’t there with you in Birmingham facing dogs and fire hoses. This is me: Olifami. The same Olifami that was with you the night Harlem went up in flames. But now I have a family and I choose not to fight in the streets. I have an office to fight from, and I have fought and won cases for fair housing, affirmative action, health care, and I am not ashamed to write a big, fat check for something I believe in and that doesn’t make me any less committed than you. So don’t you dare look down your damn nose at me, Adibola.

Marge comes from a standpoint that recognizes active, forceful displays as being the only acceptable way to stand up for black rights. At this stage in their lives, the Bankses have a

different understanding. It in no way means that they are less committed to the cause; in fact, from his position as a lawyer and later judge, Philip is better able to effect change than he would be if he was only protesting.

*The Hate U Give* is unavoidably based on the idea of activism as well, especially as it relates to current issue of police brutality. The novel centers on Starr's reaction to witnessing a white police officer shoot and kill her childhood friend, Khalil, and the subsequent responsibility she feels to defend his honor to the country. While Khalil's actions leading up to the shooting are left up to interpretation in both the novel and film adaptation, the unfortunate fact remains that he was killed. This matters because the novel was published just four years after a handful of unarmed black men were also killed by white officers.

From a very young age, Starr has had the importance of activism instilled in her. This concept manifests in the very first scene of the movie in which her father, Maverick, is seated at the kitchen table with his young children. He ardently and repeatedly quizzes them about the Black Panthers' Ten Point Program and explains why he believes each point is a consecrated fundamental. The portrayal is slightly different in the novel than it is in the movie, but it is discussed all the same. Maverick's repeated emphasis on the Ten Point Program is the exact reason why Starr eventually comes forward to testify about what happened the night Khalil was murdered because if she remains silent, she believes that she is wrong. However, testifying does not give her the peace she believed it would. What she really desires is for the police officer to be held accountable, e.g. found guilty, but she does not get that resolution by the novel's end.

Just as American history has tainted the landscape for unity amongst black people, I posit that the staunch belief in activism is another holdover from when blacks and whites were not treated as equals. The tumultuous Civil Rights Movement pitted unfairly treated second class

citizens against their white counterparts in instances that cannot easily be forgotten. I dare say that while legislation has changed over the last fifty years, the sentiment has not. That fight is over, but there is a “new” perceived threat to black life: police brutality. The rash of police related killings in the mid-2010s undoubtedly inspired Angie Thomas to write *The Hate U Give*. It is evident by Starr’s declaration at the end of the novel, accompanied by the names of black men who had been killed in the last ten years, that she will speak up because she does not want to forget the people who have been killed.

However, there is not just one acceptable form of activism. There does not even have to be. Being accepted in the black community does not have to depend on marching in Black Lives Matter rallies or participating in dangerous riots that decimate local businesses. It also does not mean that all white officers must immediately be accessed as a threat to black lives. It has been illustrated time and time again that education is the most powerful way in which to enact change. Just as Philip Banks advocated to his friend Marge, fighting injustice with an educated, open, and capable mind is the best way in which to fight oppressions, whatever they may be.

In addition to the characteristics mentioned in the previous chapters, speech, style, and activism are the three ways in which blackness is easily and quickly accessed in black individuals. Any deviation from the black “norms” previously mentioned automatically qualifies that person as either being a sellout, imposter, or quite simply, “white.” However, these assessments are nothing more than ridiculous inaccuracies that enable the perpetuation of prejudice in the black community. There is no standard representation of black. Despite the feeling of the community, the aforementioned qualities are not requirements for inclusion, but function rather as bigoted means for exclusion.

## Conclusion: Lessons for Future Generations

To conclude, race is a harmful social construct that only functions to further divide factions of society that have already endured centuries of discrimination. Over the years, a variety of efforts have been made to bridge the gaps between the demographics, especially between blacks and whites. The measures have been largely successful for the most part, but they have inadvertently created a whole new problem. An unspoken fragmentation exists within the black community, and left unaddressed, it has been allowed to erroneously set a precedence for what is and what is not acceptable behavior and attitudes for people with darker skin tones.

As the black population has begun to reach levels of prosperity that had previously been held only by white populations, discontent has simmered just below the surface and for many reasons. Poverty is largely seen as a norm or rite of passage among black people. Inversely, education functions as a conduit that allows for members of the community to make their way out. Those who are condemned to study at inadequate schools are not able to climb out of their stations, at least not as easily as those who are given the opportunity to attend schools in districts that are better funded. Consequently, attaining an education in an environment that does not align with or reaffirm the opinions and beliefs of the black community seemingly means that a new type of education must be taking place—an education that is believed to be akin to brainwashing. Socialization exists at the intersection of poverty and education because it largely shapes the landscape of a person's life. The further removed a black person is from their community, be it because of education or by the physical location of their home, the more unlikely they are to be embraced by people who most resemble them. These people—the outsiders, the “white” blacks, the Oreos, the high saddy—are then forced to endure a lifetime of outside ridicule and deep introspection about what it means to truly “be” black.

The TV show *black-ish* is an invaluable, contemporary example of the aforementioned schizophrenic-esque lifestyle that marginalized, atypical black people currently deal with in today's society. In his professional life, patriarch Andre "Dre" Johnson is the head of the urban division at ad agency Stevens & Lido. This position is an incredible testament to his education and perseverance, but Dre treats it as more of a handicap. Because his career has allowed him to live a privileged, comfortable lifestyle completely opposite of how he grew up in Compton, Dre constantly seeks to infuse his life—as well as the lives of his children—with nuggets of black culture that reaffirm his status as a black man and theirs as a black family. Consequently, he seems to come down on his firstborn son, Junior, the hardest. One of the major plots of the show is Dre's constant preoccupation with making sure that Junior is black "enough." This manifests as Dre trying to redirect Junior's love of hobbits and science fiction fan groups to playing basketball and catcalling women. Another example occurs when Junior's parents and grandparents desperately attempt to persuade him that black people just *cannot* be Republicans. In his defense, Dre mostly comes around to begrudgingly accept his family's choices regarding their enactment of blackness, but it does not change the fact that he maintains that there is a marked difference.

On a superficial level, *black-ish* is a sitcom that can be appreciated for its star power, genuine humor, and the fact that it dares to approach this unspoken topic, but the truth is that the show is more damaging than helpful. Laughs aside, Dre's incessant adjustments to his family members' lives reinforces the idea that blackness is only acceptable in one form. More importantly, it underpins the idea that authentic blackness cannot coexist with upward mobility and financial success. That is not only not the case, but it is incredibly insulting. Black people should never fear that success will come at the cost of their identity.



I close with this aforementioned declaration: there is no such thing as one representation of blackness. In researching this topic, I came across several articles and a Carleton student's thesis about realizing this fact. *Fresh Prince* was instrumental to breaking down the misconception of blackness being diluted by "white" influences, i.e. financial standing and socialization. Despite being brow beaten over the duration of their respective lifetimes for not having experienced or agreeing with "typical" black things, the authors of these articles have come to the comfortable realization that "what we call black is really a multitude of shades, dimensions, and cultures" ("Finding My Identity Via *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*"). Blackness is a state of being that is not, cannot, and should not be defined by rules or unacceptable, uncharacteristic manifestations. There is neither a right way nor a wrong way to do it. It is an experience that simply is.

## References

- Andrews, Kehinde. "'Urban' Sounds: It's Time to Stop Using This Hackneyed Term for Black Music." *The Guardian*. 14 August 2018.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/music/shortcuts/2018/aug/14/urban-time-stop-hackneyed-term-black-music>. Accessed 4 November 2019.
- Barris, Kenya, creator. *Black-ish*. ABC Studios, 2014.
- "Beginnings of Black Education." *Virginia Museum of History & Culture*.  
<https://www.virginiahistory.org/collections-and-resources/virginia-history-explorer/civil-rights-movement-virginia/beginnings-black>. Accessed 12 November 2019.
- Byrne, Jason. "Ocoee on Fire: The 1920 Election Day Massacre." *Medium*. *Florida History*. 23 November 2014. <https://medium.com/florida-history/ocoe-on-fire-the-1920-election-day-massacre-38adbda9666e>. Accessed 21 October 2019.
- Cobb, Jelani. "Black Like Her." *The New Yorker*. 15 June 2015.  
<https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/rachel-dolezal-black-like-her>. Accessed 1 November 2019.
- Cunningham, Vinson. "The Case for Black English." *The New Yorker*. 8 May 2017.  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/05/15/the-case-for-black-english>. Accessed 12 November 2019.
- Giwa-Osagie, Saidat. "Finding My Identity Via *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*." *The Atlantic*. 24 May 2016. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/05/the-enduring-freshness-of-the-fresh-prince-of-bel-air/484082/>. Accessed 7 December 2019.
- Hudak, Stephen. "Ocoee, Where Massacre Occurred in 1920, Aims to Shed Past Reputation as 'Sundown' Town." *Orlando Sentinel*. 19 November 2018.  
<https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/orange-county/os-ne-ocoe-massacre-proclamation-20181115-story.html> Accessed 21 October 2019.
- Jones, Quincy and Borowitz, Andy and Susan, creators. *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. Hollywood Center Studios and NBC Studios, 1990.

Keith, Verna M., and Cedric Herring. "Skin Tone and Stratification in the Black Community." *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 97, no. 3, 1991, pp. 760–778. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/2781783](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2781783).

La Ganga, Maria L, and Matt Pearce. "Rachel Dolezal's Story, A Study of Race and Identity Gets 'Crazier and Crazier.'" *Los Angeles Times*. 15 June 2015. <https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-spokane-naacp-rachel-dolezal-resigns-20150615-story.html>. Accessed 4 November 2019.

"NAACP Statement on Rachel Dolezal." *NAACP*. 12 June 2015. <https://www.naACP.org/latest/naacp-statement-on-rachel-dolezal/> Accessed 4 November 2019.

News Desk. "Book Review: 'Piecing Me Together,' An Important Take on Racism. *The Jakarta Post*. 24 April 2018. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/life/2018/04/23/book-review-piecing-me-together-an-important-take-on-racism.html>. Accessed 1 November 2019.

"Pine Hills CDP, Florida." *United States Census Bureau*. [https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community\\_facts.xhtml](https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml). Accessed 21 October 2019.

*Sorry to Bother You*. Directed by Boots Riley, performances by LaKeith Stanfield, Tessa Thompson, Omari Hardwick, and Danny Glover, Annapurna Pictures, 2018.

Stump, Scott. "Rachel Dolezal: 'I Don't Identify As African-American, I Identify As Black.'" *Today*. 27 March 2017. <https://www.today.com/news/rachel-dolezal-i-don-t-identify-african-american-i-identify-t109654>. Accessed 4 November 2019.

*The Hate U Give*. Directed by George Tillman, Jr, performances by Amandla Stenberg, Regina Hall, Russell Hornsby, Common, and Anthony Mackie, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2018.

Thomas, Angie. *The Hate U Give*. HarperCollins, 2017.

Thomas, Kevin J. A. "Racial Identity and the Political Ideologies of Afro-Caribbean Immigrants." *Sage Journals*. Volume 45, Issue 1, pgs. (22-39). 21 May 2018. Accessed 4 November 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0034644618770762>

Watson, Renee. *Piecing Me Together*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017.

Wayne, Michael. *Imagining Black America*. Yale University Books, 2014.

Williams, Monnica T., Ph.D. "Colorblind Ideology Is a Form of Racism." *Psychology Today*. 27 December 2011. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/culturally-speaking/201112/colorblind-ideology-is-form-racism>. Accessed 4 November 2019.

